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"I wanna go in the phone". Illiteracy, informal learning processes , 'voice' and mobile phone appropriation in a South African township

by

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"I WANNA GO IN THE PHONE". ILLITERACY, INFORMAL LEARNING PROCESSES, 'VOICE' AND MOBILE PHONE APPROPRIATION IN A SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIP.

ABSTRACT

The recent uptake of mobile phones has been especially remarkable in the developing world. For the first time in history the poorest of the poor can also take part in the telecommunication society. Mobile phone use is embedded in existing socio-economic realities which (re)shape technology as much as technology (re)shapes society. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in an impoverished community in Cape Town, this paper discusses the ways in which and to what extent (device) illiteracy influences the use of the mobile phone and vice-versa. By looking at different cases of mobile phone use of illiterate women, this paper explores the informal learning practices these women engage in, in an attempt to get as much out of their technological device as possible. Trying to circumvent the limitations and frustrations their illiteracy causes, these women have found own ways to appropriate the phone without being able to actually 'read' the device. Driven by their media ideologies and by ideas on what mobile phones can possibly offer them, the new communication technology instigates literacy interests and practices that emerge in very informal learning environments. The mobile phone has become a learning tool, nourishing learning practices and in an unprecedented way urging women to explore and learn, and to challenge their illiteracy.

Keywords: mobile phones, illiteracy, informal learning, 'voice', communities of practice

1. INTRODUCTION: OBTAINING VOICE THROUGH LEARNING THE MOBILE PHONE

The explosive spread of mobile phones in the developing world has created new hopes as to how the handset could transform the fortunes of the poor in developing countries (Sey, 2011). Contrary to PC-based Internet, and prior to that landline phones and television, mobile phones appear to be the first powerful information carrier genuinely democratically distributed across the world. Thanks to the marketing of very basic but cheap mobile phones, the introduction of prepay non-subscription plans and the *caller party pays*-system (Minges, 1999), even the people at the bottom of the income pyramid in many parts of the world have a mobile phone. For the first time in history, they can take part in the telecommunication society, as insufficient service delivery, high installation costs and financial constraints in the less developed parts of the world have always limited the spread and accessibility of earlier technologies, such as landline telephones.

Mobile technology is playing an increasing role in addressing many development issues (mobile banking and the spread of health and agricultural information to the most remote areas for example) and a lot of research has been done on the social, political and economic impact of mobile phones on the daily lives in developing countries (Klonner and Nolen, 2008; Forestier et al., 2002; Waverman et al., 2007; Reuben, 2007; Sokari, 2010 and Donner 2008 for example). The spread of mobile Internet, in turn, has created new hopes to finally close the so-called 'digital gap' between the 'connected' developed world and the 'un(der)connected' developing world (see Wade, 2004; Mbarika, 2002). The intensive use of online and mobile communication technologies moreover instigated hopes on how ICTs could address and sustain informal, formal and lifelong learning practices. 'mLearning' or 'mobile learning' could play an unique role in reaching those who are outside the scope of formal or institutionalised schooling and open doors to educational and informational programmes for both institutional and out-of-school learning practices. Online and mobile communication technologies open a vast space of opportunities for various forms of informal learning, offering users access to vocabularies, registers, styles and genres, as well as templates for practices (Blommaert & Velghe, 2012; see also Gee, 2003; Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009; and Stone et al. 2003, Wang et al., 2005; Traxler & Leach, 2007 for examples in the developing world). Most of those researches and projects argue that the mobile's portability, simplicity and affordability make it a natural fit for education initiatives in places where PCs and Internet connectivity may be rare (Donner, 2008). The

majority of those m- and e-learning programmes however are high-profile and techno-centric projects (e.g. 'One Laptop per Child' and 'Hole-in-the-wall' projects[1]), for which often special applications are developed adapted to local contexts, with specific purposes and target groups in mind. The sharing and sending of images and video's, the design of specific educational (mobile) content and the use of bulk SMS mailing are the three main ways in which m-learning is implemented.

Not much research has been done on the most basic informal learning processes that the appropriation and distribution of mobile phones in the developing world create, and for which no special applications and programs need to be developed: the informal learning processes illiterate, semi-literate and literate people can engage in, in order and in an attempt to get as much out of their technological device as possible. In order words: the informal learning processes people engage in when they learn – by themselves or with help from others - how to 'read' their handset.

Since people never learn 'a language', but specific and specialized bits of languages, sufficient to grant them 'voice' and to make themselves understood by others (Blommaert, 2005), people's repertoires consequently can be seen as an organized complex of semiotic traces of power they gathered in the course of their life (Blommaert & Backus, 2011). 'People gather *things they need* in order to be seen by others as 'normal', understandable social beings' (Blommaert & Backus, 2011: 28), or in order to have a 'voice' in specific contexts, specific time-frames and with specific interlocutors. Learning processes of language(s), 'develop in a variety of learning environments and through a variety of learning modes, ranging from regimented and uniform learning modes characterizing schools and other formal learning environments, to fleeting and ephemeral 'encounters' with language in informal learning environments' (Blommaert & Velghe, 2012: 1). As said before, the high uptake and intensive use of mobile communication technologies open new opportunities for, and consequently generates a need to investigate informal learning, especially in impoverished communities such as Wesbank (see further), where 'the macro-contextual circumstances of poverty, unemployment and social marginalization turn various forms of literacies into rare commodities' (Blommaert & Velghe, 2012: 2). The uptake of the mobile phone has partly changed this and has made certain forms of literacy (device literacy, SMS literacy, standard English and 'supervernacular' literacy[2] etc.) more accessible to vast numbers of poor and marginalized people. The large cost difference between SMS and voice services for example encourages illiterate and low-literate people to teach themselves how to read and write simple SMS messages (see Aker et al., 2010) and instigates literacy interests and practices that were often absent before the uptake of mobile phones. According to Aker et al. (2010) mobile phones – and in particular SMS – serve as a potential educational tool by allowing adults to practice their reading, writing and numeracy skills via communication with family, friends and commercial contacts.

In line with the New Literacy Studies (NLS) movement, we approach literacy here as a complex of social and cultural practices rather than the mere acquisition of 'technical' reading and writing skills. Literacy must be seen as an unequally distributed resource which (re)produces old and new inequalities, integrally linked to cultural and power structures (Juffermans & Van der Aa, 2011). Obtaining voice then relates to having the freedom to have one's voice heard as well as having the freedom to develop a voice worth hearing (Hymes, 1996). With the arrival of the mobile phone, new power structures have come into play, and the new communicative environments – created by the mobile phone and other ICTs – have developed an elaborate and deterritorialized sociolinguistic system which people (partly) have to learn in order to become part of and have a voice in those new communicative communities or new 'supergroups' (Blommaert, 2011). Illiterate and semi-literate people who are learning how to work and to appropriate their mobile phones and literate people who are learning 'new' specific and specialized bits of language used on the Internet and in mobile

[1] See http://one.laptop.org/ and http://www.hole-in-the-wall.com/ respectively.

[2] The term 'supervernacular' was first used by Varis and Wang (2011), Velghe (2011) and Blommaert (2011) referring to stabilizing and changing dialects we actually observe, hear, speak, read and write and that emerge out of the large-scale and deterritorialized communicative communities that the spread of ICTs such as the Internet and the mobile phone has created. Mobile texting codes (characterized by abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons, etc.) can be described as a supervernacular, with its englobalized patterns of formation of symbols, an emergent normativity of vocabulary and spelling and the deglobalization processes resulting in dialects of the supervernacular (Blommaert 2011).

communicative environments are broadening their language repertoires, in order to function and be seen and heard as 'normal', understandable beings within the cultural and power structures of new communicative communities.

Based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in Wesbank, an impoverished and socio-economically disenfranchised community in Cape Town, South Africa, this paper focuses on the ways in which and to what extent illiteracy and device illiteracy influence the appropriation of the mobile phone and vice-versa. By looking at different cases of mobile phone use of illiterate, semi-literate and literate (middle-aged) women with an often very limited educational background, we will focus on how women have found their own ways to appropriate the phone and how the uptake of new communication technologies instigate literacy interests and practices. With other words: this article will look at the informal learning strategies women engage in, in an attempt to make 'themselves understood by others' and to gain 'voice' in new communicative realities by learning how to be(come) cell phone literate and look at the different levels of competence that this informal learning generates. As the use of mobile phones gets more functionally embedded in the local communicative economies, the more members of the community understand how to use a mobile phone and circulate written messages, informal learning processes in turn create 'social constructivist learning' and 'communities of practice' (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1999) in which learning must be seen as a (social) activity and in which anyone with any knowledge on mobile phones and mobile phone literacies becomes a potential and highly appreciated tutor.

Let us start by preparing the canvas, and provide some background information on Wesbank and the research methodologies. After that, we will turn to different case studies of informal learning practices and mobile phone use amongst illiterate and semi-literate middle-aged women in the community.

2. MOBILE PHONES IN AN IMPOVERISHED TOWNSHIP

2.1. THE FIELD[3]

Wesbank was built in 1998 as part op the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a South African socio-economic policy framework which the first democratic government in South Africa designed and implemented after the abolishment of Apartheid in 1994 to tackle economic, racial and spatial legacies of the Apartheid era and to improve government services and basic living conditions for the poor. The housing project that was part of the RDP aimed to provide 1 million subsidized houses before the year 2000. RDP-houses generally have an average size of 25 square meters, are built in bricks and have a roof made out of corrugated metal.

Wesbank is situated on the Cape Flats, the so-called "dumping grounds of Apartheid", a dry and sandy low-lying area, 27 km out of the centre of Cape Town and located 12 kilometres away from the closest (formal) job opportunities. The building of Wesbank was the first post-Apartheid housing project in the area of Cape Town that was not segregated along racial lines, but was intended to give home to deprived people, irrespective of colour and descent. This first so-called "rainbow community" had to give home to 25.000 people in 5149 subsidized houses. The actual number of residents in Wesbank is estimated to be double the official figures. 'Black', 'coloured' and some 'white' people[4] and a growing number of African immigrants are living in the same community, although the majority (73%) of the population is 'coloured' and Afrikaans speaking (Dyers, 2008). As Wesbank was intended to relocate "maximum subsidy" (i.e. minimum income families) (Achmat & Losch, 2002), poverty has been characterising the eligible population from the first days of Wesbank's existence.

[3] A more detailed description and discussion about Wesbank and mobile phone use in the community can be found in Blommaert & Velghe (2012) and Velghe (2012) respectively.

[4] The term 'coloured' remains problematic, as it formed part of the segregation policy of the apartheid government to clearly define and divide the different sections of South African population. On the other hand it is a firmly entrenched term, still used by the South African population itself. In this article inverted commas are used to indicate this dilemma.

Basic service delivery is very limited. Gangsterism and crime rates are very high, mainly due to high unemployment rates, the constant inflow of new residents, easy access to drugs, alcohol and firearms, the absence of a police station in the area and the flourishing, deeply rooted presence of two big and many small criminal gangs. Recent unemployment rates for the area are not available; the latest report dates from 2001 and mentions 60% of unemployment among the active population in the area. This figure even increases when considering women (70,4%) and black people (75%) (Nina & Lomofsky, 2001). According to Newton (2008) 77% of those living on the site have to survive on a monthly income of 400 ZAR (€38,2)[5] or less.

2.2. METHODS AND DATA

The data for this paper has been collected during two separate ethnographic fieldwork periods in the community of Wesbank, from January 2011 till May 2011and November 2011 till April 2012, with a special focus on cell phone use and cell phone literacy amongst middle-aged women[6]. The study included in-depth face-to-face interviews with twenty-five different women and two group interviews. One of the group interviews was with eight 60-years-and-older women attending the crafts club of the Wesbank Senior Citizen's Organisation and the other with six women attending another crafts club for middle-aged women, both held in the Multi-Purpose Centre in Wesbank. The face-to-face interviews were all held in the residential premises of the women and lasted between one and two hours. Potential interviewees were selected and introduced by two well-known community workers or by snowball effect, in which interviewees introduced friends or neighbours who were willing to participate.
Two interviewees were isiXhosa and English-speaking and another was raised in an English speaking 'coloured' family. The other 22 interviewees were all 'coloured' and Afrikaans-speaking. Most of the interviews were completely held in English, or in a mix between English and Afrikaans. Two interviewees answered in Afrikaans (with considerable code-switching to English) although the questions were asked in a mix between Afrikaans and English. As the home language of the researcher is Dutch, this did not create any considerable problems or miscommunications. Although the interviewer used a list of questions as a directory during the interviews, the interviews were semi-structured, allowing interjections, follow-up questions and space for the interviewees to accentuate own fields of interests.

Other data were gathered by handing out questionnaires in the high school and one of the three primary schools in Wesbank. The questionnaires consisted of two parts, one part to be filled in by the learners and the other part by the (grand)mothers. 80 out of 160 questionnaires were returned. In this article, data from the interviews and the questionnaires are used interchangeably. People questioned in the survey will be referred to as 'persons questioned' and people interviewed will be referred to as 'interviewees'. When referring to both, the term 'respondents' will be used.

Six interviewees kept a mobile phone diary, in which they noted all the text messages and phone calls they made and received during the course of one week. Three 'cell phone courses' were organised. During the first course two teenage girls taught 4 middle-aged women how to send and read text messages. The course was held in a residential premise of one of my contact persons in Wesbank. The second and third course focused on the use of mobile Internet (mainly Google) and was given by me to 1 and 2 women respectively in their own houses.

As much time as possible was spent in the community and daily observations of female behaviour, literacy classes for adults, family situations, cell phone use and informal conversations on the same topics were written down in a fieldwork diary, to further support the qualitative and quantitative date. Other data are pictures of businesses displaying cell phone numbers in the community, text messages

[5] Exchange rate of June 2012.
6 The term 'middle-aged' in Wesbank is difficult to define or outline, as many 40-year-old women have grandchildren already and are effectively 'retired' due to chronic unemployment. The average age of the women questioned in the questionnaires was 47,8 years and the women interviewed face-to-face were all between 40 and 65.

received from residents and screenshots from a very popular cell-phone based instant messaging service called MXIT[7]

3. 'I WANNA GO IN THE PHONE': LEARNING PRACTICES

> "But my husband didn't show me HOW to go IN you know if someone give you a message then I must go further IN to see yeah *watter* [Afrikaans for 'what'] time ehr the date everything. Sometimes if I see a message then I press / inside here [holding her phone in her hand] to see *ja* and then I go to see further and then I BUT ehr I mean if I want to send you ehr ehr ehr / a message to WRITE *ja* I get confused / I don't know. But he [her husband] didn't show me exactly what what and what what if SOMEone *ne stuur* [*ne* is an Afrikaans stop word and *stuur* means 'send'] me a message then I musn't then I must go *mos* [Afrikaans stop word] within the files to see maybe I go to the ehr netbook or message into message or to the ehr inbook or whatever [means inbox] but I don't know ja then I got confused."[8]

> "But ehr sometimes eh if I go maybe in a map in the web or what they say or Bluetooth or ehr if you want like ehr you and me want to talk then you go *mos* into the web or what do they say it's map ne they call it or / what they call it /// MXIT [screams] MXIT ja"

> "Yes, I want to learn how to send ehr ehr a letter for someone … and THEN I would like to know how do I go in HERE [pointing to the camera] to come to the ehr ehr to the camera

'Inbox', 'Bluetooth', 'camera', 'a text message': these words have become entrenched in our daily vocabulary after more than a decade of mobile phone appropriation and use. As can be seen in the abovementioned interview extracts with three different middle-aged women in Wesbank, the use of those words and concepts is not fluent at all and causes hesitation (extensive use of 'ehr's' for example), the use of stop words (*ne* and *mos*) and a pile of incorrect terminology ('netbook' and 'inbook' instead of inbox, 'web' and 'map' instead of MXIT and 'letter' instead of text message). As 56% of the women questioned had their phones for less than two years, and most of the women interviewed for less than 5 years, mobile phone vocabulary seems not yet fully integrated in women's daily language repertoires. That 73% of Wesbank residents are 'coloured' and mainly or often solely Afrikaans-speaking, also influences the women's fluency in using (English) ICT terminology. In most of the interviews I had, women used the Afrikaans word *boodskap* instead of 'SMS' or 'text message', even when the interview was conducted in English. One can already observe informal learning practices here: through the use of a mobile phone and its different features, women encounter certain registers (or bits of) of English that are new to them. The women cited in the abovementioned extracts are still in the process (and struggle) of learning and memorizing these new words. As language settings on South African mobile phones are set in English, women engage in informal learning practices when they are 'reading' the device's display and when they browse through different files and applications. The mere use of their handsets thus broadens their language repertoires.

As said before, macro-contextual circumstances characterizing Wesbank turn various forms of literacies into rare commodities (Blommaert & Velghe, 2012). Asked if they read in their leisure time, 66% of the questioned women claimed to read 'sometimes', but more than half of this 66% only

[7] MXIT is a mobile instant messaging (MIM) program used on mobile devices and comparable to computer-based instant messaging programs such as MSN Messenger. MXIT is a very popular communication tool, especially among South African youth. MXIT users can chat either in chatroom (often centred on themes or geographical locations) or on a one to one basis with contacts one has to invite and accept. The fast growth and popularity of MXIT may partly be attributed to its cheap costs; a MXIT message costs 2 South African cents compared to 70 South African cents for a SMS message.

[8] All interview extracts are transcriptions from interviews conducted during both fieldwork periods mentioned. A / indicates a (breathing) pause and capitals indicate emphasis. For ethical reasons, no real names and initials are used in this article. In all interview extracts 'Int' stands for the interviewer and other initials for different interviewees. Words between square brackets are comments added by the author. To indicate code-switching to Afrikaans italics are used.

occasionally read the Bible in Afrikaans. Newspapers and magazines are scarce in the community, and 'Die Son', a sensational tabloid with a lot of colour pictures was the most popular and available newspaper among the women interviewed. Other newspapers are not being sold in the local formal and informal shops. Except for schoolbooks, novels, magazines and other reading materials are hardly present in the homes (see as well Pretorius & Rubens, 2005; Moloi and Strauss, 2005 cited in Walton, 2009 for a small-scale study on leisure reading amongst South African youth in Pretoria and a national study respectively). Wesbank does not have a library; the closest library is located in the neighbouring township, accessible by a gang-controlled pedestrian bridge over the highway. With a very low average education rate - with only about 10% of the inhabitants having finished the two last grades of high school (Blommaert et al., 2005) – and limited 'literacy stimulation' in out-of-school contexts due to poverty, social marginalization and limited resources, informal learning incentives for literacy acquisition and maintenance are very restricted. According to Aker et al. (2010) in a Nigeran context, there are few opportunities to use newly acquired literacy skills on a daily or even weekly basis, once an adult learns how to read and write. Even if reading material in local languages is available (which is the case in South African languages), illiterate adults may need to see a direct livelihood benefit from literacy to keep the motivation to obtain and maintain literacy skills (Oxenham et al., 2002 cited in Aker et al., 2010). Mobile phones offer a new platform for practicing daily literacy and numeracy skills. According to Aker et al. (2010), the pricing scheme of text messaging versus calling is a financial incentive to use a mobile phone as a natural platform for literacy and numeracy, allowing people to contact family and friends or request information while at the same time practicing reading and writing skills.

In the two following chapters we will look at the informal learning practices of an illiterate and a semi-literate woman respectively, and the strategies they engage in, in order to obtain a 'voice' and become cell phone literate. In both cases, some sort of formal learning instigated and empowered the women to learn more, informally and more individually, and to challenge the limitations of their illiteracy.

3.1. ADULT LITERACY COURSES AND THE CELL PHONE: THE STORY OF SARAH

Three of the four women following Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) basic literacy courses[9], organised in the High School in Wesbank, were very eager to learn how to send SMS messages once they would master basic literacy skills. From the moment Marie[10] started following the literacy courses, her friends of the ladies' club in the Multi Purpose Centre of which Marie was an enthusiastic member started teasing her, by constantly asking her when they could expect to receive her first self-written text message. Marie however still had a long way to go: she was only capable of using her phone for voice calls; she did not even know how to store numbers in her contact list and was carrying a note book everywhere she went in which she carefully wrote down the most important numbers she used to call.

Another lady, Sarah, 59-years-old, was following the basic literacy courses for the second time. The first time she dropped out since she was not satisfied with the teacher. The moment I met and interviewed her, she had just started the courses again. Growing up with foster parents on a farm, she had to stop school after the first grade. She never had the opportunity to attend school after that until she reached the age of 56. She never managed to attain basic literacy skills on her own, although she was able to copy words written in capital letters and to recognize certain names and words she encountered in daily life. Since she has only 20 persons in her mobile phone contact list, she is capable

[9] The Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) courses that are organised in the evenings in the High School in Wesbank and during some afternoons in Hoofweg Primary School, are organised within the framework of a national foundation towards lifelong adult learning and development. The Department of Education provides adult education and nationally recognized certificates for the learners at the ABET schools. ABET offers basic literacy courses from level 1 till 4, but also courses such as economic management, life orientation, human and social sciences, mathematical sciences, arts and culture, tourism and the opportunity for adults to finish their matriculation year.

[10] Marie is a pseudonym, such as all other names used throughout the paper.

of ‘reading’ the names, inferable by the length of the names and their first letter(s), as she explains in the following extract.

> “*Ja* if I look at that is now Desmond **[**a name in her contact list**]** *ne* I will know where is Desmond because I see his name there even if I cannot write it I know *mos* that is Desmond I will go to Desmond even on my own I can go to Cape Town **[**with public transport**]** if I just see the letter and I see the name I recognize *ja* you see / yeah you know we know how to survive / it’s part of life”

Sarah got her first phone as a present from her son five years ago. That phone got stolen, after which she got herself a new one, a Nokia. She mainly used her handset to call people, and her daughter also explained her how to send a ‘Please call me’ (PCM) message[11]. The use of some other features, such as the camera and the video camera, she learned by herself, as she explains in the following extract.

> “No I know how to MAKE pictures but I don’t know how to SEND it that’s also a thing I want to learn and the video and stuff like that I know how to USE it I tried it one day *ja* … I was *mos* here alone I haven’t got friends here so I was playing with the phone and I say OOOH ok here is the video and I must press HERE and HERE when I want to go to the video you see that’s *mos* the camera now *ne* **[**showing it on her phone**]** that’s now video here that’s also a thing I found out myself / even if I take photos I can’t SAVE it that’s a thing I can’t do / where is it I DID take photos *ne* so I was looking for it again so I don’t know

Other women I talked to experienced the same learning processes: they are sitting bored and alone at home and to pass time they ‘play’ with their phone to eventually, by trial and error, discover new features on their handset.

> K: Sometimes the children they ask me to take a picture then I TRY and I TRY and I then I tried and I look and then ALL of the sudden I get it yes and then I know how to take the picture / and that’s all
> Int: But then you don’t find the picture back afterwards because it’s somewhere there in your phone
> K: It it IS somewhere here in / but I don’t know where to FIND it again [laughs]

Since most people in Wesbank do not possess technological devices widespread in other social milieus, the mobile phone was used for a broad range of purposes (as a lamp, a radio, a calculator, a photo camera, a watch, an alarm, a laptop, a video camera, a game computer, etc.). For illiterate and device illiterate women, it was very frustrating to know that all those features are just there to grasp, but inaccessible due to mere ignorance. One interviewee once observed a lady in the local supermarket, constantly using her mobile phone. Curious to know what the woman was doing, she approached and asked her. It turned out that the woman was using the calculator on her handset to precisely calculate the total costs of the groceries in her shopping cart, to avoid money shortage at the counter. For women living in Wesbank, who have to consider every cent they spend and make deliberate choices on how much money can be spend for what purposes, this specific use of a cell phone is very practical and helpful in managing a household. Being illiterate, and as a consequence device illiterate, the knowledge of such a missed opportunity was very frustrating for my interviewee and she was determined to sooner or later learn how to use the calculator.

Sarah was very eager to learn more about her phone as well, but could not really ask help to the people in her social network. Her children regarded her as too old and ignorant to be taught new things, mainly because of her illiteracy. Her husband was not really helpful either, which caused a lot of frustration. She was very aware of the opportunities a mobile phone could offer her, but was unable to

[11] A PCM message or ‘Please call me’ message is a free service offered by the cell phone providers; it allows sending a free text message to any other telephone number with a request to call back when you run out of airtime in cases of emergency. Those free messages - a daily limited amount of them – read ‘please call me’ and feature the number requesting the callback, followed by an advertisement. Nowadays, one can add a very short personal message of ten characters to these PCMs and personalise the telephone number by adding one’s own name or nickname. For many middle-aged subliterate women in Wesbank, a PCM is next to calling and receiving calls the only thing they can use their handsets for.

access and use the features needed to pursue her goals. It turned out that she was very creative in her ideas on appropriating the phone in such ways that it would complement or 'mask' her illiteracy. She discovered that her phone had a voice recording function. She was desperate to learn how to use this function, so she could record Bible study meetings, sermons and conversations with people, instead of taking notes such as other people did. To fill her unemployed days, she wanted to use her video camera to film her environment en her grandchildren. She was planning to inform at a photography shop in town whether they could burn those little movies on DVD, so she would be able to watch them when being bored at home. She also knew that it was possible to send short sound recordings by MMS[12], and regarded this as a perfect replacement for SMS text messages for which she would not need reading and writing skills. With my help, seated shoulder by shoulder in her sofa, we figured out how to do this, and thus together engaged in an informal learning process, since I also did not know how to send voice recordings.

The process of recording a short sound message and sending it to a contact in the contact list was rather complicated and consisted of 6 main steps[13]. On Sarah's request, we repeated the whole process up till 6 times, during which she memorized the successive steps by mainly using her visual memory. Two days after the interview I received a MMS from Sarah, a short voice recording in which she greats me, thanks me for the 'lesson' and asks me how I am. She had sent a voice MMS to two other friends in Wesbank as well, who were highly enthusiastic and responded immediately with a phone call.
Three weeks later, I suddenly received an empty SMS message, followed by a SMS that only said "Hello Fiekie". Since I had lost my mobile phone previous to that, and thus as well lost all my contact numbers, I did not know whom the message was from. I responded with two text messages in English, in which I explained the loss of my phone and asked who the sender was. Two hours later I received a phone call from Sarah: she hadn't been able to read my texts, since they were too complicated and in English, but just wanted to let me know that the two SMSs were hers. When I visited her the day after, she explained me that the MMS voice recordings turned out to be too expensive (0,95 ZAR compared to 0,50 ZAR for a SMS). The financial burden of an MMS motivated her to find out herself how to send a text message.

One week after the first interview with Sarah, and thus two weeks before this particular event, me and two teenage girls attended an ABET literacy course, which we concluded by teaching the four 'pupils' - Sarah was one of them - how to use the keypad on a cell phone to compose words and sentences, explaining how every key bears up to 4 letters or several symbols (the key 2 bears the letters a b and c, the key 3 d, e and f for example). Due to time shortage we were not able to explain how to send a text message but at the end of the class all women were able to write a full sentence on their mobile phones. The typed sentences were all a repetition of Afrikaans words learned throughout the course of the day, and were thus very basic (*Hallo, hoe gaan dit?, Ek is by die huis, Ek is op pad huis toe* – 'hello how are you?', 'I'm at home' and 'I'm on my way home). Motivated by this little course, by the basic literacy courses more generally and by the financial profit of sending SMS instead of MMS, Sarah was determined to find out the rest by herself. The first SMS that I received was empty, and proved that the informal learning process was one of trial and error, but eventually she managed to send me the 'hello Fiekie' message. According to herself, the first message was supposed to say '*die kos is in die pot*' ('the food is in the pot'), again a repetition of a sentence she learned during the ABET course that same day, but something must have gone wrong during the sending process. The interaction of the (formal) literacy courses and Sarah's urge to get as much as possible out of her mobile phone, created a highly productive and instructive (informal) learning environment. In the

[12] AN MMS is a Multimedia Messaging Service, a standard way to send messages that include multimedia content to and from mobile phones. The most popular use of MMS is to send photographs, videos, ring tones, greeting cards and images.

[13] To send a voice recording on a Nokia phone, one must first select the voice recording application in the file 'Media'. Once the recording is done, one must go to another file ('Galery') and select the respective recording. By selecting 'Options', then 'Send' and then 'Audio Message' one is asked to select a contact in the contact list or to give a cell phone number, after which the MMS is send.

course of three weeks, she learned how to record voice and send those recordings as MMSs, how to use the keypad on her handset and how to send SMS messages to an addressee in her contact list. Sarah's strategies to mask and master her 'illiteracy' are a proof of the fact that stereotypes such as 'literates' and 'illiterates' are often inaccurate and far too narrow to describe the strategies people use to deal with 'literacy events' (Dyers and Slemming, 2012). Regarded by her immediate environment as a totally illiterate person, Sarah actually managed to learn how to (partly) read her mobile phone and managed to obtain a 'voice', first by literally sending off her voice in MMS messages, and later on by combining her basic literacy skills learned through formal schooling with informal learning strategies. Her 'voice' might be very silent and inaudible for a lot of people – the 'hallo Fiekie' message did also confuse me and did not exceed mere phatic, non-informational communication (see further) – but through trial and error Sarah managed to be 'out there' and to apply her newly acquired basic literacy skills and her motivation and enthusiasm to learn to learn even more.

The interaction and mutual stimulation of formal literacy courses and informal mobile phone learning practices forms the starting point of three different literacy programs which have introduced and used the mobile phone as a tool for practicing and maintaining acquired literacy skills. One project is the JOKKO Initiative in Senegal that combined adult literacy courses and mobile phone courses, using the mobile phone as a pedagogical tool with which adult pupils could practice their reading and writing skills as well as a social mobilization catalyser by creating a virtual SMS community network, in which one text message could be dispersed by a server to all people in the community network (see http://jokkoinitiative.blogspot.be/ for more information). The second project was an initiative of the University of California (Berkeley and Davis) "Mobile Phones for Literacy, Project "*Alphabétisation de Base par Cellulaire* (ABC)" which aimed to explore how relatively cheap SMSs could be used to turn mobile phones into an adult literacy platform in Niger, after the participants finished basic literacy courses (see Aker et al., 2010). The third project is very similar to "Project ABC" and was initiated in Pakistan as a joint initiative between UNESCO, Mobilink (a national telecommunication service provider) and a local NGO. The project involved adolescent female learners who were given mobile phones and who received informative daily text message in Urdu which they were expected to respond to, in order to practice their reading and writing skills (for more information, see http://www.unesco.org.pk/education/mlp.html). Despite the success of aforementioned projects (no drop-outs during the course, improved communication, improved literacy and confidence, no special applications or programs needed, financial gains by avoiding voice calls, the rise of 'communities of practice', improved persistence of education gains, etc.) and the enthusiasm and eagerness to learn on and through a mobile phone observed with Sarah and most other middle-aged women in Wesbank, projects like these don't have many successors so far.

3.2. CELL PHONE COURSES AND LITERACY: THE STORY OF KATRIENA

Throughout the interviews, the answers on the questionnaires and during the cell phone courses it became clear that women in Wesbank were mainly lacking basic cell phone usage skills. As said before, 10 of the 25 interviewees did not know how to send a text message. Not all of those women were fully illiterate, but low education levels, semi-literacy or sub-literacy in English and/or Afrikaans, lack of experience with technological devices and a social network reluctant to tutor, forced many Wesbank residents to rely disproportionally on more expensive communication options such as voice calls (see also Walton, 2009).
Learning how to send a text message turned out to be more complicated and demanding than I initially expected, however, since the women attending the small mobile phone course organised by me and two teenage girls did not yet know how to use the keypad on the phone. During the courses I moreover discovered that (device) literacy is not the sole barrier for middle-aged women to learn how to text: presbyopia or eyesight deterioration that comes with age is making it very difficult for a majority of women to read the small letters and numbers on the keypad and on the display. Due to poverty most women lack the finances to buy corrective lenses.

Explaining how to use the different keys with their respective letters and symbols, took a disproportional amount of the teaching time. Low literacy levels, a limited knowledge of the sequence

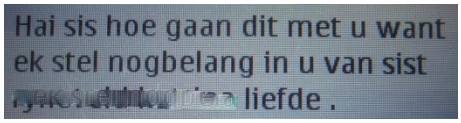
of letters in the alphabet, the order of the keys and the respective letters on the pad, and bad eyesight caused confusion, frustration and trial with a lot of (t)error. One woman only managed to control the keypad system once I wrote all the options per key down on paper, as follows.

1 a: press 1x
b: press 2x
d: press 3x
2 e: press 1x
f: press 2x
g: press 3x
etc.

When I went to visit that lady two weeks after the cell phone course, she was still using my paper as a guideline whenever she wanted to write a text message, as she did not manage to do it without. She had been writing text messages to a couple of friends, especially in the evenings. Her friends who received SMSs from her made jokes about her spelling and grammatical mistakes. She was unable to show me some of her sent messages, since she had been taking so many pictures with her mobile phone of her first new-born grandchild that she had to erase all her message to have enough space on her memory card.

Once learned and mastered, however, two of the four women who attended the cell phone course started using SMS extensively. Katriena for example sent 39 text messages in the 6 days following the cell phone course, an average of 6,5 messages a day. Within those 6 days, she received 17 answers. This is a lot, especially if we look at her cell phone diary filled in two months before she learned how to send text messages. That time, during the course of one week, zero messages were sent and 7 received, of which 4 were advertisement messages of the cell phone provider, 2 were PCM messages and only one was an actual text message received from a church member, informing whether Katriena was at home.
Let us now look at some of Katriena's text messages that she sent in the weeks after the cell phone course. The messages are all in Afrikaans, and only once code-switching to English ('*ge wharrie*' which is a combination of the Afrikaans '*ge*'- used for past participles and 'worry') occurs. In the figures below, I give the English translation of the text message, without taking the spelling and grammatical 'errors' in consideration. I did respect the (lack of) punctuation in the English transcriptions. Underneath, I enumerate all the Afrikaans words with grammatical and spelling 'mistakes', followed by the 'correct' orthography.

Figure 1: SMS from Katriena to a church member



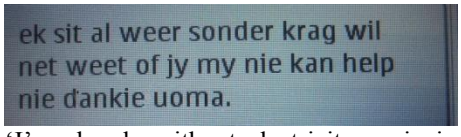
'Hai sis, how are you doing because I'm interested in you of sist [full name] love'

- *nogbelang* = nog belang

Figure 2: SMS from Katriena to her daughter

'I love you'

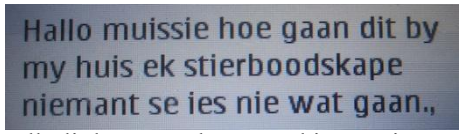
Figure 3: SMS from Katriena to a neighbour



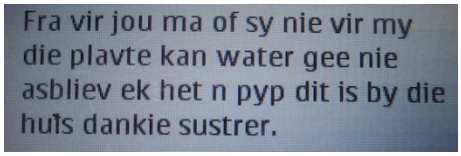
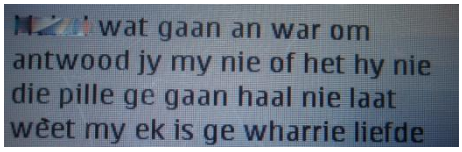
'I'm already without electricity again just want to know whether you can help me grandmother.'

- *al weer* = alweer

Figure 4: SMS from Katriena to a neighbour



'Hello little mouse how are things going at my place I send messages nobody says something what's going.,'
- *muissie* = muisie
- *stierboodskape* = stuur boodskappe

- *uoma* = ouma	- *niemant* = niemand - *ies* = iets - *wat gaan* = wat gaan aan
Figure 5: SMS from Katriena to a neighbour  'Ask to your mom whether she can give water to the plants please I have a water hose it is at the house thank you sister' - *fra* = vra - *plavte* = plante - *asblief* = asseblief - *sustrer* = suster	**Figure 6: SMS from Katriena to friend in Wesbank**  '[friend's name] what is going on why don't you answer me or did he not go and get the medicines let me know I'm worried love' - *an* = aan - *war om* = waarom - *antwood* = antwoord - *ge gaan haal* = gaan haal

Just like Sarah, Katriena grew up on a farm in the countryside. Being the oldest child, she never had the chance to go to school, since she had to look after her siblings while her parents were working on the farm. A lady who was also living and working on the farm taught her how to write her name and surname. Up until the age of 16 these were the only two things she could write. At the age of 16 she tried to learn how to read and write by herself, copying words she saw around her and trying to decode words and sentences from newspapers and magazines. It was only at the age of 62 that she attended school for the first time, when she started following the ABET classes in Wesbank. Very laboriously, she is now capable of reading the Bible, and occasionally reads magazines and spiritual books. English is still very difficult, if not impossible, for her to read and write. She claimed that the last time she really wrote was when she was attending the ABET courses, which was 4 years ago. She really wanted to go back to school to be able to better master her reading and writing skills, since she wanted to sit an examination in order to attain more responsibilities in her church community.

Since she claimed to never write in her free time, the sudden explosion of SMS communication is very remarkable. Writing and reading SMS messages seemed to be the main literacy activity she engaged in on a daily basis. By comparing the text messages written the week after the cell phone courses with the ones written three weeks later, it became clear that Katriena's confidence to write SMSs grew considerably. The text messages became longer, often using all the 160 characters per SMS or even exceeding this limit. Whereas the first text messages were very short and similar to one another, mainly focusing on greeting the addressee and informing about his/her wellbeing (Figure 1 and 2 for example), the text messages some weeks later considerably changed in content and length. This is a pattern that recurs in many cell phone practices of subliterate women in Wesbank. Although extreme low levels of literacy can eventually lead to text-based use of the cell phone (writing and sending of SMSs for example), what recurs in the mobile writings of low literate women are standardised messages that are merely 'phatic' (Malinowski, 1923 and Miller, 2008) in content. In other words, these text messages are "a communicative gesture without the intention to inform or exchange any meaningful information or facts … but to express sociability and maintain connection or bonds" (Miller, 2008: 393-394). The 'Hello Fiekie' message from Sarah for example did not intend to carry information or substance, but merely concerned 'the *process* of communication' (Miller, 2008). The two English SMSs that I sent as an answer to Sarah's phatic message (in which I explained I lost my phone and as a consequence did not know whom the message was from) exceeded this phatic content in that I asked for information. Sarah was not able to decode my message, and had to seek recourse in a phone call in order to stay connected with me. The first text messages sent by Katriena all had the same 'phatic' content, in that they only intended to greet the addressee and to open up the new channel

of communication that the use of text messages had created. Only after some weeks of familiarisation, Katriena started using the SMS service to exchange information. She started sending SMSs to organise her life, manage her household and to ask for help when needed (see Figure 3 in which she asks for electricity, Figure 6 to inform whether someone bought her medicines). Figure 4 and 5 are text messages sent to two neighbours and her son in Wesbank while Katriena herself was away for the week, visiting family in the countryside. In Figure 4 she informed whether everything was ok at the house during her absence. In the message in Figure 5 she asked the daughter of one of her neighbours whether they could water her plants. Since the mother did not have a cell phone, Katriena had to ask the daughter to pass the message.
In Figure 4 and 6 one can see that Katriena expected answers on her messages and that she got irritated when people didn't reply ('nobody says something what's going on' and 'why don't you answer me'). Her best friend in Wesbank, who also followed the cell phone course, never replied to Katriena's text messages after they both learned how to send them. Katriena always mentioned this when I saw her, and the reluctance of her friend to reply caused a lot of friction and discussion in their friendship. These response expectations of Katriena are remarkable, since three weeks prior to that she had never been able to answer any text message received from others. Moreover, it proves that mere 'phatic' communication is a highly valued form of communication, which we should not just overlook. Just as one expects a greeting back when one greets a neighbour in the street, Katriena also expected an answer on her text messages. Sent messages lacking any form of meaningful information or content, only intended to greet and to 'link-up' (Horst and Miller, 2005) with people in one's network, are real communicative gestures with certain intentions, implications and consequences. In an impoverished community such as Wesbank and the Jamaican low-income communities where Horst and Miller (2005) did research, the 'link-up' strategies created by 'phatic' mobile communication generate a safety network of acquaintances, neighbours, church members, friends and family members that can be called upon when help or advice is needed. Wajcman et al. (2008: 648) argue that "maintaining contact via short calls (phatic communication) plays a role in sustaining intimate relationships when those calls are between family members". SMS messages can create new forms of intimacy and can form and deepen relationships, "enhancing the ability to be communicatively present while being physically absent" (idem : 648).

If one looks closer at the writing (i.e. typing) and literacy skills of Katriena, one quickly discovers a 'sub-elite literacy economy' (Blommaert et al., 2006) in which a lot of 'errors' against standard Afrikaans orthography are made and in which the spelling of certain words is very inconsistent. Such literacy practices present a "sociologically realistic" form of literacy in that they mirror the marginalised status of the community in which they occur (idem). In this particular case, they moreover mirror the marginal educational background of the person producing the texts. According to Blommaert et al. (2006:2) "the 'margin' so to speak, is not necessarily a space in which people fail to meet norms, but it can as well be seen as a space in which different but related norms are produced, responding – 'ecologically' so to speak – to the local possibilities and limitations. … Lifted out of their local context, they bump into the homogenising, singular images of normativity dominant in most societies and get disqualified without much ado". The text messages produced by Katriena are, in other words, 'placed resources' (Blommaert, 2003; Prinsloo, 2005; Norton & Williams, 2012): resources that are only functional and 'audible' in one particular place "but that can become dysfunctional as soon as they are moved into other places" (Blommaert, 2003: 619). If we approach literacy as a social practice instead of as an acquisition of certain skills (Street, 1985), then we must recognize multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, contested in relations of power and always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles (Street, 2003). The literacy produced in Katriena's text messaging 'works' in a local – marginalized – context: the addressees have responded to her messages and fulfilled the tasks she gave them (watering the plants, taking care of the house, buying medicines). In other words: in the local sociolinguistic and socio-economic reality that characterizes places like Wesbank and that has limited Katriena's educational background more generally, the literacy produced in Katriena's SMSs grants her 'voice'; a voice that might not be 'heard' if one lifts those literacies out of the local context but that are perfectly audible in the specific conditions and contexts in and for which the 'voice' is produced and uttered.

Katriena's enthusiasm was big once she was able to send and receive text message and, after a second 'private' cell phone course in which I taught her how to use the web search engine Google, browse the World Wide Web. Bigger was her disappointment however when I went to visit her the last day of my fieldwork stay in South Africa. Two days before my goodbye visit, her son had bought a Blackberry smartphone. He quickly discovered however that he could not operate the handset, and had forced his mother to relinquish her easy manageable Nokia phone in exchange for his Blackberry. Anyone else would have regarded this as a good swap, but not Katriena; her newly acquired and practiced literacy skills were closely linked to and entirely depending on the device literacy of that one specific Nokia phone.
With the loss of her phone, Katriena's literacy thus got lost as well. None of the acquired skills remained and she was catapulted back to the first days of cell phone adoption. She was no longer able to store contacts in her phone and was using her old paper telephone guide again, neither was she able to browse the web, send text messages, read messages received, listen to music nor take pictures. She could only make and receive calls and send PCMs. With the loss of her phone, her 'voice' got nipped in the bud and she was left unheard, in her own words 'totally cut off from the world' that she recently discovered. Other women I interviewed and talked with mentioned this correlation between literacy skills and one specific handset as well. This as well is a sociologically realistic form of literacy, in the sense that Katriena's literacy only worked because it was habitual, i.e. because she could always use the same instrument to practice her acquired literacy skills. Marie, the women (mentioned in 3.1.) who kept all her contact numbers in a notebook instead of in a contact list on her phone, did not want others to explain her how to save the contacts in her phone. She was planning to sooner or later purchase a new handset, and thus regarded any new acquired cell phone skill as useless, since she would have to learn everything all over again once she had a new phone. Losing a mobile phone through loss, theft or wear meant much more than merely losing a technological device and created much more problems than merely the financial burden on the household when having to purchase a new one. As becomes clear in Katriena's case, the loss of a phone attended with loss of literacy and 'voice'.

In this chapter we have seen how two low- or quasi illiterate women have managed to obtain a 'voice' – however silent it may be - by using their mobile phones as an instrument of communication. Whereas in the case of Sarah the basic literacy courses and the financial benefits of SMS versus MMS messages created a highly instructive informal learning environment, the cell phone courses that I organised, Katriena's urge to 'link-up' with her immediate environment of friends, acquaintances, family and church members and her wish to expand her literacy skills caused an enormous expansion of SMS communication in a short span of time.
Both learning environments have been created through individual channels and because of the mobile phone interests of both Sarah and Katriena themselves. We have seen that the literacies created through those channels (individual tutoring, cell phone courses, trial and error, literacy courses) are very fragile and thus can get lost very easily – through exceeding 'phatic' content or by the loss of one specific device for example. In the following chapter we will discuss how institutions and organisations – instead of individual channels in the private sphere - can also become learning environments for literacy acquisition, sometimes unintentionally and unplanned. We will, among others, look at the case of Pearl who discovered a whole new communicative world through her membership of one particular church community.

3.3 INFORMAL LEARNING AND CHURCH: THE STORY OF PEARL

In line with Horst and Miller's research (2006) among low-income Jamaicans living in the *favelas*, the way in which mobile phones link with church networks is crucial in alleviating social problems of what Jamaicans themselves describe as 'pressure', a negative feeling which includes elements of loneliness, depression and boredom. Church community members, prayer and bible study group members, pastors and women known in the community for their healing prayers and special talent to feel physical and mental discomforts by simply being in a person's presence, are main contact groups in the mobile phone network of most middle-aged women living in Wesbank. Residents used their mobile phones extensively for religious and spiritual purposes; they arranged transport to and from

church, requested prayers from addressees, sent prayer messages to relatives and friends or subscribed to religious chain messages from famous preachers and church leaders. One lady who filled in a mobile phone diary received 18 calls during the span of one week. Twelve of the 18 calls concerned requests for prayers of people physically or mentally not feeling well.

Prayer chain messages are composed by one person and then forwarded to new addressees by the initial addressees, to then be forwarded again, and so forth. They are mostly established in 'standard' English but sometimes include textspeak (characterized by abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons, etc.) as well. Middle-aged Afrikaans-speaking women living in Wesbank are often capable of speaking English - or a specific Capetonian vernacular called 'kombuis-English'[14] – but hardly encounter or read written English. The same counts for middle-aged isiXhosa-speaking women. Reading those (textspeak) English text messages represents a real challenge; it broadens the linguistic repertoires of the women and challenges their literacy skills.

"I pray the 5 P's of GOD over u 2 day:
His Power
His Presence
His Protection
His Purpose &
His Peace
. God Bless ."

"Dear God. The lady reading this is beautiful, classy and strong and i love her Help her live her life to the fullest. please promote her and cause her to *some text missing*"

The two transcribed text messages above are two examples of religious chain messages that I received from two different women in Wesbank. The left SMS contains two cases of textspeak (*u* instead of 'you' and *2 day* instead of 'today'). The right message is written in 'standard' English, but does not strictly respect rules of punctuation and the use of capitals. Part of the message was missing, as the message exceeded 160 characters, the limited amount of characters for one SMS. Two Afrikaans-speaking ladies who usually never write text messages in English forwarded the messages to me. Asked how they had been able to read those chain messages, they said they asked their children's assistance. Through their devotion and religious commitments, those women have been motivated to expand their (device) literacy skills.

Pearl, a middle-aged Xhosa woman who speaks Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa, became device and ICT literate as a consequence of her memberships of a specific church congregation, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG)[15]. UCKG has 30 church locations in Cape Town alone. The church that Pearl attended is located in a predominantly 'white' and 'coloured' Afrikaans-speaking middle-class suburb of the Cape Town metropolitan area, 20 kilometres out of the city centre and 10 kilometres away from Wesbank. English was the language used and spoken in all the 30 churches. The UCKG has embraced and applied ICTs in order to reach their church communities and followers. The homepage of the South African website of the UCKG immediately links to the church's Facebook and Twitter account (see http://www.universalarkcommunity.com/ and http://twitter.com/#!/uckgsa)

Next to the UCKG church services, Pearl attended their weekly 'sisterhoods', a religious meeting platform for the female church members. During those meetings women discussed the Bible, got lectures on spiritual topics or discussed and shared daily problems and worries. Women attending these 'sisterhoods' received homework: every week they had to fulfil certain tasks in the house or in their community, aimed at creating a more pleasant living environment and family feeling. The tasks varied from cleaning up the house, cooking a nice three-course menu to cleaning the wardrobe and donate the cloths that are no longer worn to less privileged neighbours. To prove that the weekly tasks

[14] 'Kombuis English', also called 'Kaaps' or 'kombuis Afrikaans', 'Cape Flat English', or 'Cape Flat Afrikaans' (depending on the matrix language) is the name given to the unique blended variety of English and Afrikaans and to a lesser degree other languages like Malay, isiXhoas, etc., spoken in the Cape Peninsula.
[15] The universal church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) is a Pentecostal Christian organisation, established in Brazil in 1977. Today, the church is present in 180 countries. Thirty of them are located on the African continent. See www.uckg.org.za for the South African website.

had been fulfilled, the members had to take pictures and then send the pictures in a word document to the group's email address. Another task was to post three comments on the church's blog during the span of one week.

Pearl was thus not only obligated to purchase a handset with a camera, but also had to learn how to take pictures, how to use a text editor, how to send an email with an attachment and how to access and comment on the church's website and Facebook profile, in order to get regular updates on the church's program and the weekly tasks. Assisted by her daughter, who attended a similar youth group in the same church, Pearl's religious background thus compelled her to become device and Internet literate. As she was not wealthy enough to buy two third generations (3G) mobile phones with camera and Internet access, Pearl used her daughter's 3G mobile phone or went to a cybercafé close to the church when she needed to upload pictures, read or send emails or write posts on the blog. Wesbank does not have any cybercafé so far. Most residents access the Internet on their mobile phones, or travel at least 10 kilometres to the closest cybercafés in neighbouring suburbs. As all communication with the church was in English, Pearl exuberantly expanded her English writing skills, and moreover encountered textspeak in Tweets, text and Facebook messages. The following transcribed text message is written by Pearl, in which both isiXhosa (bold) and textspeak English is used. None of the words are written in 'standard' English.

> "Hi **makoti** hpybltd annvrsari lovechersh n apprctyr hby ja … ja .. james sori **ndiyathintilha**"
> Hi **young bride** happy belated anniversary love and cherish and appreciate
> your husband ja … ja … james sorry **I stutter**

According to Pearl herself, she learned how to write textspeak from observing her 18-year-old daughter and was trying to learn it by herself, especially to be able to write more words in one text message and read the Twitter and Facebook messages of the UCKG. With the help from her daughter who gave her input for textspeak on the one hand, and the church who expected her to be very productive in the new communicative environment on the other hand, two different 'forces' propelled Pearl to expand her literacy skills and ICT literacy.
When Pearl sent a text message and hesitated how she can abbreviate certain words, she took pen and paper and wrote the word in 'standard' English (or Afrikaans), to then decide which letters she could erase without making the word illegible. The words 'annvrsari' and 'apprct' were created in that way. Although 'anniversary' is more commonly abbreviated in textspeak as 'annvrsry', Pearl's abbreviation of 'appreciate' is the common textspeak variant used in the global supervernacular. The abbreviation of 'husband' as 'hby' is uncommon and difficult to decode, a proof of the fact that Pearl's textspeak is not yet totally streamlined with global textspeak and that she is still in the process of learning. In line with Deumert and Masinyana (2008) who investigated mobile language choices of bilingual (isiXhosa-English) South Africans and discovered a reluctance to abbreviate isiXhosa words, the two isiXhosa words (*makoti* and *ndiyathintilha*) used in het SMS are written in full, regardless the fact that they are quite long.

As we can see in Pearl's text message above, the introduction to new ICTs such as mobile phones and computers has led to the emergence of new ways of expression. Mere use of standardized forms of expression, as detected in the SMSs of Katriena for example, can, after some time of familiarisation, turn out to be insufficient in order to be a full member of the new communicative environment and thus develop into more complex forms of expression. Propelled by her daughter and her church community, Pearl did not only have to become device literate and ICT literate, but also had to learn how to make use of and how to apply new language resources. New literacies such as textspeak, created as a consequence of the new communicative environment and shaped by the opportunities and constraints of the electronic medium (Crystal, 2001), have to be learned and made one's own. The informal learning processes that women in Wesbank have to engage in, in order to learn those 'new literacies' and in order to have a 'voice' in the new communicative environment will be scrutinized in the following chapter.

4. EMERGENT 'NEW' LITERACIES: ILLITERATE IN A NEW COMMUNICATIVE ENVIRONMENT[16]

New communicative environments create 'new channels of communication, new linguistic and cultural forms, new ways of forming and maintaining contacts, networks, groups and new opportunities for identity making' (Varis & Wang, 2011). Short- and long-distance mobile – and often online – networks create new identity repertoires and large-scale (mobile) communities, communities that develop new vernaculars; *supervernaculars* so to speak (see also Varis & Wang, 2011; Velghe, 2011; Blommaert, 2011; Blommaert & Velghe, 2011). Those new communicative environments - created by the mobile phone in this case – are challenging the established rules of 'standard' language practices. A new *supervernacular* – textspeak or instant messaging language for instance – is however not merely characterized by happy heterogeneity but is constantly controlled, ordered and curtailed (Varis and Wang, 2011).

Not anything 'goes' and is allowed in texting, and instead of looking at textspeak as a corruption of language and a degradation of standard spelling, it is interesting to look at *emergent normativity* that goes hand in hand with the development of such a new global vernacular. 'Gr8, C U@8' will be regarded 'correct' according to the norms and rules of the 'global medialect' (Mcintosh, 2011) *supervernacular*. Gr8, S U@8 would be 'wrong'. As it is possible to write things 'wrong' or 'correctly' in textspeak, the norms, modes and codes of the *supervernacular* have to be learned and made one's own. Just like one has to learn standardized forms of language, one has to learn and acquire the *supervernaculars* and their dialects. Not learned in formal schooling, alternative literacies, such as textspeak, are learned through often very informal, more democratically organized learning practices (Blommaert & Backus, 2011). As repertoires are indexical biographies of the people using them (idem), it is important to speak or write 'right', as repertoires and the possibility of applying or not being able to apply them at the right time and place and in the right context shelter much more than mere linguistic resources. They produce social and cultural meanings of the self and 'contribute to the potential to perform certain social roles, inhabit certain identities and be seen in a particular way by others (idem). For Pearl to be a full and respected member of her church community and her sisterhood and thus, as a consequence, be regarded as a good Christian, she had to learn how to master those new repertoires (textspeak, posting blog comments, reading Twitter posts, writing e-mails, etc.).

In this chapter, we will look at two main cases of women acquiring, maintaining and deploying a *supervernacular* (textspeak) in conditions of extreme marginalization and *superdiversity* and look at the different cultural meanings of the self and the social roles that are being created through the mastering and use of these particular literacies. Moreover, we will shortly touch the topic of 'the ethnographer as a pupil'.

4.1. A SUPERVERNACULAR AS A 'SUBSTITUTE' LANGUAGE: THE STORY OF LINDA[17]

Linda is a 25-year-old 'coloured' and Afrikaans-speaking resident of Wesbank. Already during the first years of primary school, teachers expressed their concerns about Linda's writing and reading skills. Those concerns however did never cause specialized and individual follow-up. Once in High School, Linda's literacy level started causing serious problems, as she could not absorb and reproduce the graphic word-images she was taught, and could not read written texts. If tested, there is little doubt that Linda would be diagnosed with a severe form of dyslexia. Linda's mother forced her daughter to follow extra ABET literacy classes after school hours. For four months, Linda did follow the extra classes, and both she and her mother had the feeling that she was benefiting from the extra attention, as her marks at school improved. When her mom had to stay home because of pregnancy, however, Linda lost her interest and stopped attending the courses. At school, Linda tried to keep up with the help of her friends, who would read things for her and correct her writing as much as possible. Frustrations and loss of motivation, however, made her drop out of High School before reaching the final matriculation year.

[16] This section has been mainly adapted from Velghe (2011) and Blommaert & Velghe (2012).
[17] For more information and details on Linda, see Blommaert & Velghe (2012).

Sitting bored and jobless at home, Linda spent most of her time on MXIT, chatting with friends from inside and outside the community. Her friends introduced Linda to MXIT; they assisted her in downloading the application on her phone and were still assisting her when it came to Linda's reading and writing on the instant messaging program. The first weeks of chatting, Linda constantly carried a piece of paper with her on which her cousin wrote down the most common abbreviations, emoticons, paralinguistic constitutions and contractions used in textspeak. With support and intervention of several friends, who wrote sentences and status updates down on paper for her to copy or who corrected her when things were written 'wrongly', Linda engaged in an informal learning trajectory in which textspeak proved to be an instrument for considerable progress and self-development. For Linda, textspeak was not an isolated object of learning; its acquisition went hand in hand with the further development of pen-and-paper writing and reading. Both forms of literacy development (pen-and-paper and textspeak) proceeded in parallel. Since the first day she has been on MXIT, she has started to write with pen and paper as well, something she claimed to have never done before in out-of-school contexts. Linda started copying words and sentences from her chat partners and when asking writing advice to her friends. All over the house, papers and notebooks could be found, on and in which Linda took 'textspeak notes', writing down status names and sentences she might use in the future. In this way, Linda has collected a 'corpus' of copied words, expressions and phases both drawn from MXIT and prepared for use on MXIT. Since she started being active in MXIT, her pen-and-paper writing also increased, thus creating a more complex, intertwined and layered literacy learning environment in which pen-and-paper literacy is a critical support infrastructure for textspeak. For someone who was qualified as near-illiterate due to her disability, the informal learning environment provided by MXIT, thus, appeared to provide motivation to learn, as well as an efficacy of learning practices, that Linda had never encountered at school.
As mentioned before, the combination of pen-and-paper writing and the acquisition of textspeak was also observed with Pearl, who wrote down words on paper to then decide which letters could be erased, in order to turn a 'standard' word into a textspeak variant of it.

Linda thus engaged in MXIT interactions by copying standard '*passe partout'* phrases and expressions. She asked standard questions such as *wat maak jy?* ('what are you doing'), *hoe gaan dit?* (how are you?) and was able to reply to such predictable and 'phatic' questions by means of routine answers (*ek is bored* –'I am bored' – *ek is by die huis* -'I'm at home'). This could go on for a while, and it satisfied the requirements of interaction in many instances. Her illiteracy was masked by her scaffolding practices, but by masking it she could appear as a competent user of MXIT, which gave her a certain, respectable identity towards her acquaintances in het MXIT network. In other words, here again, the mobile phone gave Linda a 'voice', which she didn't have before.

4.2. LEARNING THE 'MXIT LANGUAGE': THE STORY OF LISA AND ERNESTINE[18]

Literate people encountering textspeak in SMS messages or on instant messaging platforms such as MXIT might get the feeling they are suddenly 'illiterate', not being able to decode the words and sentences produced and sent to them by their interlocutors. As repertoires are biographically organized complexes of resources, they follow the rhythms of human lives, not developing along a linear path of ever-increasing size, but developing explosively in some phases of life and gradually in others (Blommaert & Bakhus, 2011). According to the same authors, the 'language' we know is never finished and learning language as a linguistic and sociolinguistic system is not a cumulative process but rather a process of growth, of sequential learning of certain registers, styles and genres and linguistic varieties while shedding or altering previously existing ones. Consequently, there is no point in life in which *anyone* can claim to know *all* the resources of one language (idem) One might be perfectly literate in the reception and production of written standard English but at the same time have tremendous difficulties with reading and producing the written *supervernacular* of textspeak and its different dialects. As said before, in order to have a distinct 'voice' and to be heard on platforms such as MXIT and in order to be regarded as a full member of the new communicative community, one has

[18] For more information and details on Lisa, see Velghe (2011).

to learn and make the new language repertoire one's own and thus engage in informal language learning practices, learning the supervernacular and its – in this case Capetonian – dialect by trial and error.

As MXIT was regarded as a communication tool of the youth, and textspeak was commonly referred to as 'MXIT language', as it was mostly used and elaborated in instant messaging conversations, most middle-aged women I talked to and interviewed regarded textspeak as 'the language of the youth', such as the interviewee quoted in the following interview extract.

> "The MXIT language they *mos* call it the MXIT language you see I also learn how to use the MXIT language cause I never knew how to short the words cause most of my words are the whole sentence ha [laughs] but my sister send MXIT words and my sister in law she will SOME of her words is MXIT words but most of it is also the whole word cause we don't understand actually but the children I see on their phones and then they say oh mommy you're MXIT now I say no I learn from you they say no you're OLD you cannot do it and then they *skrik* [Afrikaans for 'being surprised or scared] when they see you write MXIT language it's a joke for them now you it's with the younger children you that's older how can YOU write MXIT … and it's going quick you know on the trains the people just sit with their phones like that it's like they're on the computer and you know they send messages to each other because they MXIT and they chat now and it fascinates me to see *joh* in a FLIP second you can send somebody a message I'm very honest with you I don't understand it"

Some adult women however did use MXIT as a platform to connect with the world around them, or to stay in touch with family and friends in the cheapest way possible. Those women had to acquire new literacy skills, if they did not want to be exposed as a greenhorn in the new communicative environment. Women who already possessed considerable textspeak literacy skills, said it was very easy to detect newcomers on MXIT: they simply did not know how to write (read: abbreviate) 'properly'. Lisa, quoted underneath, had been chatting on MXIT for the passed three years and mastered the new literacies of textspeak like no other. Looking at a corpus of 30 text messages and chat messages from Lisa (with a total of 343 words), we see that an average of 56% of the words and signs used are encoded, code switched or emoticons. This correlates with the research of Plester et al. (2009), who, in their research on text message language of British teenagers, concluded that 58% of the words used were textspeak instead of standard English. Lisa mastered the textspeak repertoire so good and fluently that she was no longer aware of how deeply textspeak was entrenched in her day-to-day online and offline conversations. When I confronted her with her dense use of textspeak in text messages, she reacted as follows:

> Int: Here this is from you [showing her a message she wrote to me earlier] "hpe u f9, wl hav ur *potjie* 4 suppr 2nght – plse let me know wen u get home – mwah"
> L: [reads the message aloud] hope you're fine i will have your potjie as supper tonight please let me know when you get home MWAH
> Int: So only 6 words out of 20 words are standard
> L: [shocked] is it *JOH* Fieke NO MAN you make me … [sighs and laughs] now you make me feel guilty now

Lisa's use of the new *supervernacular* of textspeak in chat and text messages was however a well-considered choice of register. Standard English – often with some grammatical or orthographic 'errors' since English is not her mother tongue – and English textspeak, as well as standard Afrikaans and Afrikaans textspeak were all part of her language repertoire, and it seemed that Lisa was literate enough to make deliberated choices of appropriate registers, according to context, value and format in and for which the piece of text was written (for a more detailed description and discussion see Velghe, 2011). This is what she talks about in the next interview fragment.

> L: Even I struggle when I when I must send like to this lady I must I must write the full sentence or the full word even to [her daughter's] ehr gym ehr ehr look here I mus I mus I mus write it full it's the coach
> Int: Ow and you say that when you write you have to think about it
> L: Jaaa I must be CAREfull then I must read OVER did I write it right

Ernestine was another middle-aged lady who had been active on MXIT for several years. After I taught her how to create and operate an email address on her mobile phone, we mainly communicated through email. Ernestine was extensively using textspeak in her email conversations (see Figure 10). Since email is a platform where one expects a more 'standardized' language use, in which emails are composed as if they were little letters (with a title, a main text and an official greeting and a name as closure), the emails I received from Ernestine were remarkable. They did not meet my expectations on how a 'real' email should look like, but answered Ernestine's opinion on what register to use when communicating on a mobile phone, the medium she was using to write emails.

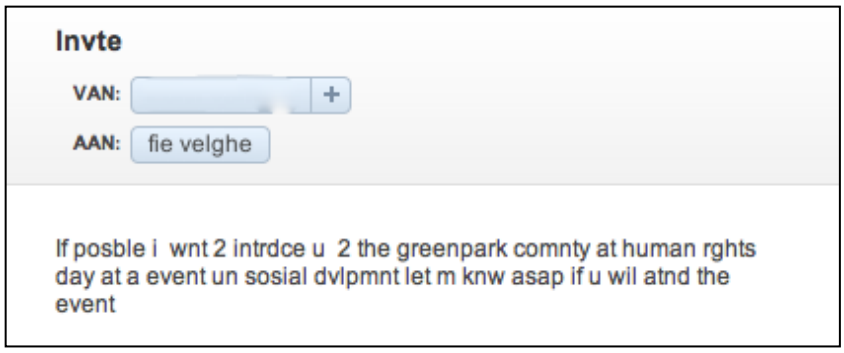


Figure 7: Email in textspeak from Ernestine
'If possible I want to introduce you to the Greenpark community [community next to Wesbank] at human rights day at an event on social development let me know as soon as possible if you want to attend the event'

According to Lisa and Ernestine, they learned the *supervernacular* through chatting on MXIT, memorizing and copying words interlocutors used before. Chatting in standard registers was regarded 'boring' en too slow. If one did not want his/her correspondents to lose interest, one was obligated to learn how to master new literacy skills, this by simply observing how other people wrote and by advising one another. Lisa mentions this in the following interview extract.

> Int: And then the language that you're using this text language
> L: Text language MXIT language mingles Afrikaans English
> Int: and how did you learn it just by doing it
> L: I just yeah
> Int: So you just learned it by yourself by trial and error and then do people like correct your mistakes or something if you make mistakes
> L: No we don't correct each other if I don't know what the person say then I say explain then that person explain then tomorrow I use the same [laughs]… for me is it *mos* no it's not something wrong you see because we if I gonna chat like FULL words then no man something is wrong is boring no it's not right
> Int: So you can see like when you are in these chat rooms who is new
> L: Ja ja [laughs]
> Int: And then do you make fun of it
> L: Not actually we help each other that person

When I asked Ernestine why she wrote *Hloz, hu ganit* (*Halloz hoe gaanit*, 'Hello, how are you') the way she wrote it in her first email addressed to me, she answered *'nou hulle sê hloz met 'n z'* ('now they say hloz with a z') in which the *hulle* ('they') referred to 'the people' chatting on MXIT and using textspeak in text messages. She must have picked up this new greeting form from one or more of her interlocutors and then started to use it herself. In this way, people are constantly changing, adapting and broadening their language repertoires in accordance with and depending on what '*hulle*' are doing and saying.

The same happened to me, once I immersed myself in South African chat and text messaging during both fieldwork periods in Cape Town. My chat and text message communication with South Africans expanded elaborately during my stays in South Africa. I might have had a voice in certain registers,

styles, genres and linguistic varieties of English, a distinct voice in English and Afrikaans textspeak was lacking. In order to be able to decode and understand the online and mobile conversations I had with South Africans, I did not only have to extend my literacy of the *supervernacular*, but immediately had to learn the dialect of the *supervernacular*, or the localized supervernacular, characterized by typical South African words, orthography and Afrikaans textspeak. More literate in the reception and production of written standard English than Lisa, Ernestine and Linda, they were much more literate than me in the reception and production of the written *supervernacular* of textspeak. Lisa and others became informal teachers, introducing me to the to me very alien localized *supervernacular*, not saving me from the challenges and the confusion the decoding of their writings were causing. In a very subtle, informal and empirical way, they became my instructors and I, the ethnographer, became the pupil, learning the supervernacular and its Capetonian dialect by simply being immersed in it, by trial and error and by asking a lot of questions. As an ethnographer approaching the field, wanting to find out as much as possible about mobile phone use and mobile phone literacy of middle-aged women in a post-apartheid township in Cape Town, I myself turned out to be illiterate and my language resources inadequate to be(come) a full member of the new communicative environment that the uptake of mobile phones, the introduction of instant chat messaging and other ICTs has created.[19]

As said before, the 'language' we learn is never finished and there is no point in life in which we can claim to know all resources of one language (Blommaert & Bakhus, 2011). Lisa, Ernestine and Pearl might have been, mainly due to their more extended educational background, more literate than Sarah and Katriena for example, their encounter with MXIT and the new language resources that are being used on such and other digital platforms made them quasi illiterate again. The same happened with me as a researcher approaching the field, with ('standard') English as my second language and totally not familiar with the textspeak variant of it. Informal learning processes (of trial and error, observation and informal tutoring by interlocutors, etc) are the only way to become literate in the new communicative environment and to expand language repertoires, in this case both in English as well as in Afrikaans, since language repertoires of such kind or not being taught in formal or institutionalised schooling. The learning of those new literacies or new language resources made it possible for Lisa, Ernestine, Linda and Pearl to expand their communicative network and to become part of new large-scale mobile or online communities and to express new identities. Lisa and Ernestina, both women in their forties, mainly chatted and flirted on MXIT with (predominantly) male interlocutors from outside the community. Linda could appear as a competent, literate user of MXIT by masking her scaffolding practices, which gave her a certain, respectable identity towards her acquaintances in the MXIT network and Pearl could, thanks to her growing digital and textspeak literacy, be a 'better' and more devoted Christian in the eyes of her church community.

In the last chapter, we will elaborate to the informal teacher-pupil dynamic, shortly touched in this chapter already, more deeply and we will see how the uptake of mobile phones is creating highly instructive learning environments, in which everyone with any knowledge on mobile phones, mobile phone appropriation and mobile phone literacy becomes a potential and highly appreciated tutor.

5. 'EACH ONE TEACH ONE': THE EMERGENCE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The 'Each one teach one' motto originates from American times of slavery in which slaves were denied the right to education and literacy development. When a slave learned how to read and write, the other slaves regarded it as his/her duty to teach an illiterate other. The 'each one teach one' phrase was also used on Robbeneiland in Cape Town, where political captives of the Apartheid era were locked up. In the Robbeneiland prison, it was the duty of the educated to teach the illiterate how to read and write and to share their academic knowledge with others. Expectations of such *epistemic solidarity* (Van der Aa, 2012) were also present among the middle-aged women in Wesbank. Everyone with any knowledge on mobile phone use and literacy was regarded as a potential tutor, and

[19] The 'ethnographer as a pupil' concept is elaborated extensively in Velghe (2011).

every woman I talked to was very aware about who in their immediate environment (children, children of friends, neighbours, etc.) were the most ICT literate persons.

The *epistemic solidarity* of the (device) literate however, did not always live up to the expectations of the illiterate. This caused a lot of frustrations, frictions and disappointment among the women who were really eager to learn and really wanted 'to go in the phone'. Many women observed their children doing all kind of things with the phone, using different features and applications. Once they asked their children to explain it for them, however, the children either refused, didn't have time, regarded their parents too old to learn or weren't patient enough to explain it slowly and step-by-step. We shortly mentioned this tutor reluctance when talking about Sarah (see 3.1.). She could not count on her immediate social network (her husband and children) to teach her how to use her handset at all. Katriena expressed similar frustrations several times, as in the following interview extract.

> K: My son is doing a lot of things in this phone ehr he got Bluetooth and he got OH my GOD / you name that stuff I don't know
> Int: And he never explains you
> K: No
> Int: Or you ask him sometimes what are you doing
> K: No he don't tell
> Int: Ja
> K: And then he goes ehr ehr MXIT and stuff I don't know what that is MXIT / I can't do that
> Int: O you never really ask your son you never asked him to explain it to you
> K: I ask but he goes too quick / you see and he and he he's in a hurry to tell me that must go like that and that must be that / and I can't // it goes so quick
> Int: Like you say you want to learn how to write messages and things like that so you asked your son once but besides your son you never asked someone to explain
> K: No I don't want to because people insulting you and
> Int: Because you don't know?
> K: Yes
> Int: So you're like ashamed or
> K: They say you=you like a clunt / so I don't like that [laughs]/ or they say don't be STUPID / you how can you be so stupid like that you just do that and you do I said oh no leave it / you old people are so dumb / I said no no I'm not DUMB man but I don't know this thing I'm asking for help her mother [pointing to the baby sleeping on her chest] also I ask her come delete please SHOW me then she says me no sister no I can't show you / OOH you wouldn't understand she said I said I WILL man just PLEASEe show me / she didn't / so is it

According to Ito et al. (2010: 14) "new media are a site where youth exhibit agency and an expertise that often exceeds that of their elders, resulting in an intergenerational struggle over authority and control over learning and literacy". Suddenly the youth instead of adult institutions - home and schools for example - are 'the experts' when it comes to usage and appropriation of new media such as the mobile phone. Wesbank mothers seemed to be very proud and eager to talk about the ICT expertises of their children, but were at the same time often disappointed in their children's reluctance to share that knowledge.

Among middle-aged women themselves and youth peer groups in Wesbank, however, 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1999) did emerge. According to the situated learning theory, based on the notion that knowledge exists within the social and that sees learning as an act of social participation within those communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), "the learning that happens in informal settings is a side effect of everyday life and social activity, rather than an explicit instructional agenda" (Ito et al., 2010: 21; see also Gee, 2003). Since the value of an SMS to a mobile phone owner is dependent on the number of others in his/her socio-economic network who also have access to a mobile phone, and in particular, SMS (Aker et al., 2010), individual appropriation strategies appropriate to and affordable in the local situation, may then be shared with others (Foster, 2011; Horst and Miller, 2006).
A highly valued 'each one teach one' principle was observable amongst the women attending the ladies' crafts club in the Multi-Purpose Centre in Wesbank. During the crafts club, mobile phones were - visually and audibly – omnipresent. The women put their mobile phones within reach in front

of them on the big table. Phone calls were answered during the meeting, text messages were sent, received and shown to each other and several times the camera and the calculator was used. Absent members were contacted by SMS or voice call to inform about their whereabouts and music was played and exchanged via Bluetooth. Chaired by Ernestine (see page 12) and another ICT literate women who possessed a smartphone with Internet access and a personal computer at home, the crafts club turned out to be an informal and highly instructive learning environment. The ladies constantly teased and motivated Marie (see 3.1.) to apply her newly acquired literacy skills to learn how to send text messages. If one wanted to make a picture of the club's activities or crafts work, the women assisted each other in finding out how this had to be done. Text messages consisting of textspeak were often shared and 'decoded' collaboratively. They exchanged and shared music using Bluetooth and discussed information and ideologies on new applications and the mobile Internet.

The often very implicit processes of informal learning that I underwent once I started immersing myself in South African chat and text messaging, shows that "a large part of what defines us as social beings and learners happens in contexts of group social interaction and engagement with shared cultural forms" (Ito et al., 2010:18). Through chat and text conversations and social interaction with my interlocutors and their implicit and subtle ways of tutoring (by constantly confronting me with new words, abbreviations, styles and registers followed by an explanation when or without I asked for it) my literacy resources expanded and broadened my repertoire significantly. MXIT got downloaded and installed on my handset with the help of Lisa and her daughter, and the 'teaching' started from the first instant chat session I had with Lisa. Sitting in between Lisa and her daughter, I was chatting with Lisa, to become familiar with the functioning of MXIT. Lisa immediately sent me an image and an emoticon, showing me in the meantime which applications I had to use to do so. I answered her with 'thnx', showing her I knew how to abbreviate 'correctly'. Immediately afterwards, however, I lost all my 'textspeak credibility' by writing 'have to go' in full. Lisa's daughter started to giggle, told her mom what I just did, took her mom's phone and sent me back 'G2g', the 'correct' supervernacular spelling of what I was trying to say. Just as Lisa learned and appropriated the new vernacular of textspeak by chatting with, observing and being assisted by peers who already mastered textspeak, I now became a pupil and found in Lisa a very patient, helpful and skilful tutor. Lisa highly valued this *epistemic solidarity*, and this not only because she also had benefited from it when she was still a greenhorn in the new communicative environment. As said before, "most learning that happens in informal settings is a side effect of everyday life and social activity, rather than an explicit instructional agenda" (Ito et al., 2010), Lisa's main aim to teach me how to MXIT and how to chat 'correctly', was not to expand my literacy skills, but to safe costs when she had to contact me and to chat with me more quickly and smoothly, as chatting in standard English or Afrikaans was regarded to be 'boring' and 'too slow'.

Linda's MXIT and scaffolded literacy learning trajectory was also collective and proceeded with the vigorous support and intervention of several friends. Linda was not an 'autonomous' learner of textspeak, but other people 'gave' her knowledge and skills, for her to use in specific ways. Friends of Linda introduced her to the instant messaging program. They assisted her in downloading the application on her phone and were assisting her when it came to Linda's reading and writing on the instant messaging program. They wrote down words and status updates for her, often read out words and sentences that Linda did not understand and corrected her when she made mistakes. Linda thus drew on the repertoires of others to achieve her social goals and through the collaborative nature of this social interaction she managed to be perceived as a competent and literate user by others. Only thanks to the *epistemic solidarity* her friends, who scaffolded her literacy skills, she was granted 'voice' in the new communicative environment that MXIT created and that was so important in her daily social life.

6. CONLUSION: FROM LISTENING, LOOKING, LONGING, AND LIKING TO LEARNING

In spite of the moral panics and public anxieties (see Crystal, 2008; Vosloo, 2009 for critical approaches on the effects of texting on literacy), people in the new communicative environment

shaped by ICTs are reading and writing more than ever before. Text messages, instant messaging chatting, blogging, tweeting, Facebook, etc. all form platforms of literacy and literacy acquisition. According to Banda (cited in Deumert and Mansinyana, 2008) SMS writing constitutes an important form of everyday literacy in South Africa, especially in the metropolitan areas. Since literacy stimulation and learning in out-of-school contexts in Wesbank is, due to poverty, social marginalization and limited availability of resources and infrastructure, very limited, the uptake of mobile phones has created literacy interests, enthusiasm and an eagerness to learn amongst literate, sub-literate as well as 'illiterate' people that would have been more limited or non-existent without the presence of mobile phones. Since a mobile phone is next to a television often the only technological device residents of Wesbank possess, there is an urgent wish to use and appropriate the handset to the fullest. As can be seen throughout this paper, people in Wesbank invest tremendous amounts of time and effort in learning how to use and appropriate their mobile phones, express frustration and disappointment when the learning does not go as easy as hoped for and expect *epistemic solidarity* from youngsters and other 'experts' to share their knowledge. According to Pat et al. (2009) cited in Donner et al. (2011) 'a positive discourse of technology' emerges, in which 'users and non-users construct social-symbolic meanings of technology out of an imagined amalgam of hope, knowledge, growth, youthfulness and utility'. According to Donner et al. (2011) the simple knowledge that one has the possibility or ability to learn something new on a mobile phone is empowering in itself. Sarah for example, empowered after having learned how to send off MMS voice recordings and after some weeks of basic literacy training at the ABET school, applied her regained self-confidence to figure out herself how to write and send a text message. After Katriena found out that sending a text message was not so difficult after all, she immediately wanted to learn how to browse the web as well. Learning and knowledge incited a growth in self-confidence and made the women reflect on what else they wanted to learn on their mobile phone. Immediate detectable livelihood benefits (relative financial benefits of SMS versus voice call, a MXIT chat message versus SMS, accessing the Internet on a mobile phone versus travelling to the closest cybercafé, and the safety networks created through 'phatic' communication for example) and media ideologies are other fertile incentives that incite highly interested and motivated learners to listen, look and learn.

Since nowadays most people, even those at the bottom of the income pyramid, are in the possession of a mobile phone[20], researchers should not underestimate and ignore this newly created, vibrant and fertile domain for informal learning practices. E- and m-learning projects could play a unique role in reaching those who are outside the scope of formal or institutionalised schooling and who live in marginalized communities like Wesbank. High-profile and techno-centric projects for which special applications and software is being created, however, seem to only reach small sections of the world's population and often presuppose basic literacy and device literacy that are, so to see, lacking amongst a lot of women with poor educational backgrounds, living in impoverished areas. One cannot learn how to run if one cannot yet walk and many e- and m-learning projects that tend to skip certain steps in the learning process and that are not adapted to local contexts will not reach their objectives and will not be embraced by the local population. As said before, "the learning that happens in informal settings is a side effect of everyday life and social activity, rather than an explicit instructional agenda" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The Dr. Math program, a MXIT-based mathematics tutoring program on which learners can interact and ask their math questions to a group of registered tutors online, is a perfect example of an m-learning project that looked for an intersection of everyday life, social activity and learning[21]. Adults as well need to see immediate livelihood benefits from literacy to keep the motivation to obtain and maintain literacy skills (Oxenham et al., 2002), and a mobile phone seems to provide a unique opportunity here, as it directly connects livelihood benefits and literacy acquisition and vice versa. The mobile phone has become a learning tool, nourishing learning practices and in an

[20] According to ITU (2010a) the developing world is increasing its share from 53% of total mobile subscriptions at the end of 2005 to 73% at the end of 2010. Mobile penetration in South Africa is the highest, standing at well over 100 mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants (ITU 2010b).

21 For more information, see http://www.elearning-africa.com/eLA_Newsportal/mixing-it-with-dr-math-mobile-tutoring-on-demand/.

unprecedented way urging women to explore and learn and to confront themselves with and challenge their illiteracy (of certain registers) and the limitation this causes.

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